Richmond Folk Festival: a community celebration of national diversity with global reach

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The Richmond Folk Festival performance lineup is filled with authentic artists who share insights into the culture. Last year, Salar Nader (left) and Homayoun Sakhi played the Afghan rubab (right) and tabla during the event.

TIMES-DISPATCH

After the National Folk Festival concluded its three-year run in Richmond,
organizers of what would become its encore event wrestled with an identity crisis.

The stated goal of the national festival is “to lay the groundwork for sustainable, locally produced festivals and events that continue after the National moves on.” But Lisa Sims, then deputy director of Venture Richmond, was among the doubters about the packaging of the event as it moved into local hands.

Would its name adequately convey the festival’s multicultural appeal?

“There definitely was concern,” recalls Sims, now Venture Richmond’s executive director. “In fact, there was a real conversation: ‘Should we keep the word ‘folk’ in the title?’

“We kind of decided at that point that a lot of people understood what folk and traditional arts truly are. And it’s not just Peter, Paul and Mary; it’s not just banjos; it’s not just bluegrass.”

Ultimately, what Sims calls “brand equity” won out.

“It felt disingenuous to call it a world music festival. We spoke of calling it an international festival. But at the end, we stuck with ‘folk.’”

With that issue resolved, the Richmond Folk Festival picked up where the national event left off.

Hundreds of thousands of people who’ve made their way to the Richmond riverfront have had access to musical and cultural traditions from five continents and more than 60 nations, from Azerbaijan to Vietnam.

But don’t call it a world music festival.

The festival “is about capturing and presenting, as if in a snapshot, the rich multicultural fabric that constitutes our country at any given time,” says Blaine Waide, programming manager with the National Council for the Traditional Arts,
the nonprofit organization that plans and produces the festival with Venture Richmond.

“It is important to the mission of the festival to highlight that many of these artists actually live in the U.S., and the festival celebrates the country’s multicultural richness,” he says.

Besides, some immigrant communities may not have great access to their musical traditions. “The festival becomes a way of bringing those artists in.”

A local programming committee selects the artists with help from the National Council for the Traditional Arts. In selecting artists, Sims says, the festival is guided by the National Endowment for the Arts’ definition of folk and the traditional arts as “rooted in and reflective of the cultural life of a community” and “shaped by values and standards of excellence that are passed from generation to generation, most often within family and community, through demonstration, conversation and practice.”

Another priority is for the performers to reflect the diversity of the community.

“Our programming committee has worked diligently to really be intentional in our programming and make certain that the people who are on the stage, the people who are performing, look like the people in the audience,” Sims says.

Those efforts, at least initially, were lost on certain segments of the community who did not immediately grasp the folk festival concept.

“In early years of the National, honestly, there were more older white people in the audience,” Sims says. “It took awhile for other people to understand what this festival offered. And I think a lot of that had to do with intentionally deliberate, inclusive programming.”

Programming committee member Charleen Baylor has witnessed this change from an African-American’s perspective.
She says organizers expanded outreach and advertising to include photos showing a more diverse lineup. Artist visits to local schools and the Richmond Justice Center in the lead-up to the festival have also broadened its appeal. And this year’s event features a step show with participants from local historically black colleges and universities.

Railroad worker songs and oyster-shucking are also an element of African-American heritage, as well as the festival’s annual inclusion of gospel acts. And then there’s the work of the committee.

“We all try to be advocates in our own right,” Baylor says. “I talk about it wherever I go.”

Sims says the local programming committee is “made up of the greatest experts you’ve never heard of” — musicians, music writers, recording industry employees, and students of the cultural and traditional arts.

The committee starts meeting in November, a few weeks after the festival’s end. It holds only four to five meetings per year, but each session lasts four to five hours. It’s assisted by the National Council, which gives the committee background on artists.

“We listen to audio, watch video, and we go around the room and everyone raises their hand for an artist or not,” Sims says. “It is an incredibly democratic process — majority rules.”

“There might be someone who is a fantastic banjo picker, but who did she learn from? What is the style? ... The conversations are much deeper than ‘she sounds great,’” Sims says. “If they have steeped themselves in this tradition, then the chances are better.”

Baylor describes a process in which committee members sit around lunch for hours “listening to awesome music and watching videos of musical performances. We all
have preferences of the music we like; however, we all are able to recognize something beautiful and different.”

“We always are thinking about a ‘wow’ factor — especially for the final performance on the dance stage. We all love to see performers in their traditional regalia playing their traditional instruments most people have never seen or heard before.”

What separates the folk festival from other music festivals is its egalitarian nature. Headliners have been sprinkled into the lineup over the years. (Rosanne Cash, who serendipitously was visiting Richmond to perform a private benefit concert for Children Incorporated, was a coup.) But it doesn’t have the budget for big-name acts.

“We like to showcase performers that Richmonders would not normally have the opportunity to see,” Sims says.

This year, that could mean flamenco rooted in the Granada region of Spain; Japanese taiko drumming; Persian tar and setar; or go-go music — a funky, percussive call-and-response genre that originated in Washington — by an all-female band.

Hometown performers — such as soul singer Big G, gospel’s Legendary Ingramettes and the rootsy blues and indie rock of Angelica Garcia — are on tap for this year’s festival. But it’s not about “showcasing local artists for the sake of showcasing local artists,” Sims says. They must meet the criteria.

Waide of the National Council for the Traditional Arts says Richmond’s programming committee is “strong-willed in the best of ways” and called its feedback “essential in what’s available in Richmond and what would resonate with a Richmond audience.”

He cited one of this year’s performers, Los Wembler’s, as an example. From Iquitos, Peru, on the Amazon River, the group pounds out a mélange of Afro-Latin rhythms,
psychedelia and California surf-rock. The combination is different and fun and “speaks to the very exciting creative energy that’s in Richmond,” Waide says.

Richmond is one of a handful of cities — along with Lowell, Mass.; Bangor, Maine; and Butte, Mont. — that host successor festivals that continue to partner with the National Council for the Traditional Arts.

Richmond’s, Waide says, “... is a wonderful example of how the process is envisioned to work, the way the community of Richmond since 2008 has taken ownership of the event and made it their own.”

Sims, looking back on some early financial troubles and the discussion over whether to stick with “folk,” could not have predicted how Richmond would come to embrace its folk festival.

“It’s turned out better than I think any of us have anticipated,” she says. “And that’s due to the community.”

“The artists are authentic. They offer not just their performance, they offer insights and views into their culture that we would never get to see here in Richmond. Our goal is really to expand community with this event and expand understanding of other cultures. And I think people appreciate that.”

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